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The Pope...the KGB...the silence



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Square in May, 1981, though not fatally, and the Italian investigation into the alleged "Bulgarian connection" raises very serious questions — questions, mind you, not conviction — regarding possible Soviet complicity.

A great many people and institutions are responding with either a peculiar and resounding silence in the face of, or an active will to rebut the trend of, such questions. The distinguished foreign affairs columnist of The New York Times, Flora Lewis, reported recently that an unnamed British historian "warned against pursuing the facts of the 'Bulgarian connection . . . Remember,' he said, 'the echo of a bullet at Sarajevo set off World War I.'" Ms. Lewis argued forcefully against the presumption that ignorance on such a phenomenal scale could ever be a secure foundation for contemporary peace, but so far she has few allies.

The American, British, French and German governments, while deeply deplored the attack on Pope John Paul II, have been remarkably cautious and restrained in their comments on speculation that the Russians wanted the Polish Pope out of the way so they could more effectively crush the independent union, Solidarity. Some say the Western governments have been worse than silent. After a five-day working trip to Rome last week, Sen. Alfonse D'Amato, a conservative Republican from New York and a longtime Central Intelligence Agency supporter, accused the CIA of providing "disinformation — misleading analysis and data — to Western reporters in Rome "to discredit the Italian investigators — that's intolerable." D'Amato has asked for and received an appointment with President Reagan's national security chief, William Clark, to discuss his allegations.

The details and available evidence regarding D'Amato's charges can and will be weighed in future columns, as can evidence linking the Turkish gunman, Mehmet Ali Agca, to Bulgarian officials. But the question for Americans and their allies right now is not so much "Is the Soviet union responsible for the attack on the Pope, and to what degree?" Much more fundamental is the question of why the truth is not being sought with vigor by anyone but the Italians. And also why a policy of strict realism is not being made to underly Western efforts and hopes for peace.

There are many possible reasons for Western silence. Some are prudent and logical. Others are illogical and frightening. If somehow a smoking gun is put, figuratively speaking, in Andropov's hand, some analysts argue, it will ruin any chance of a U.S.-Soviet summit and meaningful arms control. It will wreck any chance of detente and might even provoke armed hostilities. It is even alleged by some sources that exposure of KGB involvement might lead to revelations of American intelligence blunders and even crimes in other areas.

Furthermore, the papacy itself is not the most popular institution in history, and some of its historical unpopularity may be haunting it now. Moreover, John Paul himself, out of action for many weeks and still not the man he was before someone put a bullet in him, has seen Solidarity crushed by the Polish government without direct Russian interference. Some Vatican sources say privately that he wants to "forgive his enemies," forgive and forget and get on with his much-cherished second visit to Poland next June.

THE COUNSEL TO FORGIVE AND FORGET may be the very best counsel for those primarily interested in the Kingdom of Heaven, but it is sometimes remarkably poor advice for those charged with the safety of the kingdoms of this earth. One wonders, for example, if the British historian would be quite so urbane if the victim had been Elizabeth II. Or the Archbishop of Canterbury. Or the Metropolitan of Greece. Or the Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem.

Because if, if these allegations of Soviet complicity are true, then the next victim could be any one of them, and the political landscape has changed fundamentally in a way that cannot be ignored. Why this is so, and why the free peoples of the world must face it, deserves much examination. The people who aspire to self-government have not merely a right, they have a solemn duty to decide whether ignorance means bliss.